

Learning to Laugh

By: Rabbi Yanki Tauber

If you don't like generalizations, skip this article. What follows is a simplified and condensed version of the life story of your typical human male.

We start off all gung-ho, straining at the leash, picking a fight with this thing called life. "This is the world you brought us into?" we rail at our elders. "This is the best you could do? We'll change this, we'll overturn that, we'll fix those other things, we'll kill the evil, rejuvenate the good, just you wait and see!"

So we go out and at 'em, and for ten, twenty years we have a blast. We suffer, we toil, we agonize, we rejoice over our victories, and, shouting with glee, charge back into battle. But that, of course, eventually wears down. We begin to notice how petty our victories are, how shallow our agonies. "Take it easy," we begin to tell ourselves more and more frequently. "Relax."

We learn to savor life's little pleasures. Hey, we tell ourselves (and the younger generation, but they don't get it), this is what life is really about. Find your niche, pay your bills, do unto others, listen to the music, relax.

So for ten, maybe twenty years we relax. And then, one day, we realize what's missing: we're not having fun anymore! And we wonder: is this all there is to it? If the point of it all is just some peace and quiet, then never having been born would have been quite peaceful and quiet, too, wouldn't it?

What happens next? We may get stuck right there, in the groove of a mid-life crisis that extends to life's end. Or we may rediscover the exuberance of life -- though in a deeper, more intrinsic place than our dragon-slaying youth.

In the Torah, these two states of being are embodied by two personalities: Noah and Isaac.

Noah was a survivor. In a world awash in corruption, he remained true. When the Great Flood engulfed the earth, Noah found shelter in his ark, within whose walls an almost messianic idyll prevailed. The lion dwelled under one roof with the lamb, and the mayhem raging outside was kept at bay.

In Torah, a name is everything: decipher a person's or thing's name, and you've uncovered his/her/its essence. Noah -- *Noach* in the Hebrew -- means "ease" and "tranquility." Know any happy retirees? Noachs, every one of them.

Isaac -- *Yitzhak*, in the Hebrew -- means "laughter." In Isaac's case, the connection with his life story is not immediately apparent. On the face of it, he's hardly the exuberant figure his name suggests. In fact, he's nearly invisible: though he's the

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most long-lived of the three Patriarchs, the Torah hardly tells us anything about him. There's a chapter on how his father was prepared to sacrifice him, a chapter on how his father's servant found a wife for him, and a chapter on how his wife and son tricked him. But what does Isaac *do*?

Well, we're told that he worked the land and raised crops -- the only one of the three Patriarchs to do so (Abraham and Jacob were shepherds). And there's a detailed account of the wells he dug.

Isaac teaches us that, ultimately, the laughter of life comes -- paradoxically -- from self-effacing toil. If you want biographies written about you, become a warrior. If you're looking for tranquility, become a shepherd. But if it is joy that you seek, be a farmer and a well digger. Plow and sow, breaking the heavy clods of your world to coax life and bloom from its soil. Dig, deeper and deeper below the surface of your existence, to tap its fountains of delight.

Tranquility is great, but it's not a reason to live. Joy comes from conquest: from the dragon-slaying campaigns of youth, but ultimately from the self-conquest that is life's fiercest and most silent battle. Know any quiet, unassuming folks, silent laborers at life's toil, frothing with joy within? These are the Isaacs of the world.

There's a many-faceted Hebrew word, *toldot*, which means "offspring," "product," "accomplishments" and "life story." The Lubavitcher Rebbe points out that there are two *parshiot* (Torah readings) that begin with the words, "These are the *toldot* of..." There's the *parshah* that begins "These are the *toldot* of Noah" (Genesis 6:9), and the *parshah* that begins "These are the *toldot* of Isaac" (Genesis 25:19). The first *parshah*, which tells the story of Noah's life, is called "*Noach*." The second *parshah*, which is the only one that centers on the personality of Isaac, is called simply *Toldot*.

Names being everything, what is the Torah telling us? That the story of Noah's life is the story of Noah; but Isaac's story is the story of life itself. That man may start off as a bucking bronco and mature into a Noah, but eventually he must discover his inner Isaac.

What about woman? With women it's the same story -- only it doesn't take them so long to figure it out. Women are natural laughers.

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